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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that unsatisfactory argumentative and expository texts generated by college students represent a simplification of complex discourse structures. It asserts that the usual explanations for poor student performance, such as illogical thinking, lack of academic commitment, and poor mastery of grammar, are unsatisfactory. The paper proposes that inadequate writing stems from a simplified script in the inexperienced student writer's internal representation of what argumentative discourse should be. The simplified script lacks some features that mark successful academic writing because students are unaware of the cognitive executive routines underlying sophisticated argument. When students learn to execute rhetorical strategies of decision-making, their simplified mental representation of academic discourse will give way to a mature sophisticated script, then their writing will become convincingly substantiated, more coherent, and better focused.
(MDM)

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A Chandrasegaran

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SIMPLIFICATION IN STUDENT WRITING

A Chandrasegaran

Introduction

Ineffective academic writing produced by students is characterized by inadequacies such as a lack of focus at paragraph level as well as in the discourse as a whole, vague generalizations left unclarified, unsubstantiated debatable statements, and items of information given without indicating their relation to preceding information or their relevance to the overall theme. Teachers are apt to put down these textual flaws to inability to think logically, or to a poor command of grammar and limited vocabulary, or to plain laziness. This paper offers an alternative view. It proposes that unsatisfactory argumentative/expository texts generated by students represent a simplification of the complex discourse structure of genres of writing described by Britton et al as analogic-tautologic (speculative), tautologic (impersonal logical argument), and persuasive (Britton et al, 1975).

This paper will first show why we should look askance at the usual explanations of ineffective student writing (failure to think logically, etc.). The alternative explanation - simplification of discourse structure - will be presented and illustrated with three characteristic features of student-generated argumentative texts. The final part of the paper will briefly discuss the implications of discourse structure simplification for the teaching of academic writing.

Unhelpful Explanations of Ineffective Writing

"My students can't think" is a common complaint among writing teachers trying to explain the unsatisfactory arguments in their students' essays. An example is mentioned in Enkvist (1990): "What is wrong with our students . . . is not that they don't know enough English but that they cannot think" (p.22). The complaint implies that the students concerned are lacking in intelligence and therefore incapable of logical thought, or that they are too lazy to display the necessary commitment to school writing assignments. These assumptions are not only of questionable verity but also carry counter-productive pedagogical implications.

The assumption of insufficiency of intelligence is dubious when the writers concerned are university students who have year after year passed examinations in a variety of academic subjects. Its pedagogical implication is that there is little to be done about students' ineffective academic writing because it is too late to increase a university student's intelligence quotient to enable her or him to think better. It is more useful to take the position that students can think, and to ask what cognitive manoeuvres must be executed to "think" during writing so that students can be taught efficient procedures for selecting ideas and linguistic conventions to produce organized, coherent written discourse.

Another unhelpful position is to attribute ineffective writing to laziness or lack of commitment to school writing (e.g. Pianko, 1979). Many unsuccessful student writers in my classes are among the most diligent students I have ever taught, willing to re-write a text three or four times. Each re-write is a marginal improvement over the previous attempt, clearly indicating that the root of the problem is not laziness but an unsophisticated composing process that takes time and sustained effort to improve.

The belief that ineffective writing springs from an imperfect mastery of grammar is prevalent among writing teachers. The fact that the flaws noted of ESL student writing (lack of focus, inadequate substantiation, etc.) are also observed in native English-speaking students throws this belief into doubt. Miller (1980), who taught American freshmen, and Peters (1986), who studied the writing of Australian university students, are among the researchers who report native speaker students' inability to write coherent, satisfying arguments. In the National University of Singapore where there are remedial English students who have a low level command of grammar and students majoring in English whose grammar is far better, a teacher with eighteen year's experience with both groups of students has noted the same writing problem common to both: the inability to focus their writing and sustain an argument with the needs of the target audience in mind (Kwan-Terry, 1989).

Further doubt is thrown on the poor grammar explanation in view of the observation of text linguists that "we often communicate successfully with 'deviant,' structurally ill-formed utterances" (Enkvist, 1990, p.25). From a pedagogical point of view the poor grammar explanation is an unsatisfactory explanation because of its implication that more remedial grammar lessons will lead to better written communication. As many classroom teachers will testify, the time and effort spent correcting surface structure mistakes are never rewarded with a corresponding degree of improvement in communicative effectiveness in students' texts that makes the trouble worthwhile.

We need a more satisfactory explanation of ineffective writing, and one that can provide positive directions for teachers interested in helping students develop better strategies for academic text production.

Simplification of Discourse Structure in Student Writing

This paper proposes the view that inadequate writing stems from a simplified script in the inexperienced student writer's internal representation of what argumentative discourse should be. The simplified script lacks some features that mark successful academic writing because students are unaware of the conventions of academic discourse or incapable of the cognitive executive routines underlying sophisticated argument.

Student writers simplify the discourse structure of argumentative discourse because the composing processes they have acquired in school composition classes are inadequate for the complexities of constructing organized, substantiated, coherent arguments. Unable to cope with the simultaneous demands of selecting information, ordering and restructuring it to fit the situational context, and searching for the linguistic means to signal logic and coherence, students simplify by omitting some of the operations involved in the assembly of an effective argumentative text and reducing others to manageable proportions. The simplification process is much like what children do when they produce a stick figure in an attempt to draw a human figure. Complex human anatomy is reduced to a circle for the head and a few lines for torso and limbs, and fine distinctions like differentiation between arm and forearm are omitted.

It is possible that the notion of a macro-level organizational structure of argumentative discourse is foreign to student writers. An investigation of the composing processes of ESL students at the National University of Singapore revealed the predominance of a word/sentence-focused approach to writing, and planning strategies that did not result in the integration of disparate items of information into a global plan for the whole text (Chandrasegaran, 1991). Students write as if they have no awareness of global organization plans, which raises the question: How can they simplify what they do not know?

The answer lies in distinguishing two kinds of simplification. One is the simplification of knowledge and skills that one has mastered and can perform with facility. An example is foreigner-talk which is an attempt by native speakers to simplify grammar and lexis so as to be understood by less proficient speakers of the language. The other kind of simplification is simplifying what one has not mastered

or has only a hazy notion of, much like the layman's representation of the technical procedures in a heart transplant or a two-year old's lines of squiggles which represent what he thinks writing is. The discourse structure of unsuccessful argumentative/persuasive writing generated by students falls into the second kind of simplification. It is the result of a simplistic mental script that goes like this: an essay must have 'points' related to the topic, must be organized in paragraphs, and must contain one's knowledge about the topic. The more important features (e.g. thematic unity) are wanting.

The simplistic script produces three characteristic features of simplified discourse structure discernible in unsuccessful student writing:

1. Inadequate or missing support arguments
2. Implied or unstated rather than explicit relational information
3. Omitted closure

These three manifestations of simplification will be explained below and illustrated with excerpts from the writing of ESL university students who have studied English for more than 10 years in schools using English as the medium of instruction. These students, from the arts and social science faculty of the National University of Singapore, were attending an English course to upgrade their language skills which had been adjudged to be inadequate in a qualifying test administered on admission to university.

1. Inadequate or Missing Support

Providing explanatory information or elaborative details to support or illuminate propositions is a convention of effective academic discourse. A study of advanced EFL students' essays by Lindeberg (1985) found that essays with supportive arguments to back up claims impress examiners as better than essays offering unsupported propositions.

In student writers' simplified discourse structure support is often sketchy or non-existent. Figure 1 is an example of absence of support taken from the discussion section of a student's report on the effectiveness of a TV advertisement promoting teaching as a career.

Figure 1. Absence of Support

1. 60% of the undergraduates watch most of the advertisements during commercial breaks and nearly all of them (95%) noticed the advertisement on teaching as a career.
2. This suggests that the advertisement by the Ministry of Education is successful and effective.
3. TV advertisement can continue to be used to promote the idea of teaching as a career.

(Student TLY)

Sentence 2 which states the interpretation of the finding is not substantiated, thereby raising unanswered question: Why is the advertisement considered successful? In what way is it effective? The missing support represents a missed step in the student's mental script of argumentative discourse. It results from the non-performance of a cognitive operation that activates writer awareness of the reader's need for elaboration.

When the student becomes aware of the need for elaboration the skeletal script is fleshed out, as Figure 2 shows. In Figure 2, which comes from student TLY's third attempt at the assignment, we see the writer's attempt to support her interpretation of a finding by explaining why she says the advertisement can be considered 'interesting' and 'unique'.

Figure 2. Supportive Argument Inserted

It was found that 95% of the undergraduates interviewed saw and remembered the TV advertisement promoting teaching as a career. This suggests that the advertisement was able to create a lasting impression and that it must have been interesting and unique. It is unique in that it makes use of the analogy of sculpture. In the advertisement the teacher is portrayed as a sculptor who carves and shapes stone into a human figure, just like teachers shaping the personalities and characters of students. The analogy of the sculptor stimulates interest in the audience, catching their attention and making them remember the message.

(Student TLY)

2. *Non-explicit or Omitted Relational Information*

The second characteristic of student generated academic discourse is implied or omitted, as opposed to explicitly stated, relational information. This flaw can be observed at two levels: (a) at the micro or inter-sentence level, i.e. failing to indicate logical relations between consecutive sentences or sentences in proximity; and (b) at the macro-level, i.e. failing to indicate clearly part-whole relations, e.g. between a sentence in a paragraph and the paragraph's topic idea, or between a paragraph and the overall theme or purpose of the discourse. Clear, non-ambiguous indicators of relational information are necessary to produce coherence, a desired quality of academic discourse. For a text to be coherent, according to Enkvist (1978), "every sentence . . . must have a cross-reference to at least one other sentence of that text, and there has to be an overall coherence involving the text as a whole" (p.113).

Immature student writers rely heavily on implicit coherence (Evensen, 1990) with the result that relations between ideas in neighbouring sentences have to be worked out by the reader. An example of how unclear relations at the micro level can obfuscate reader's comprehension is to be seen in Figure 3, the opening paragraph from the Interpretation of Results section of a report on whether NUS students do any reading other than assigned course-related reading.

Figure 3. Absence of Explicit Logical Relations

1. The time spent on reading the newspaper is directly related to how much knowledge the reader can obtain from the newspaper.
2. From the findings only 5% of the interviewees do not read the newspaper at all.
3. This means that out of 20 undergraduates one does not read the newspaper.
4. The reason is that it is not required in their course and their course requires a lot of reference reading.
5. However, further observation found that these people get their current affairs knowledge from watching the 9 o'clock news on TV.
6. Most of the interviewees fall into the category of those spending less than one hour reading the newspaper, which may be due to the fact that the study work load is heavy. . . .

(Student TBC)

There is no explicit relation between sentence 1 and the next four sentences, all of which say nothing about either time spent on newspaper reading or knowledge obtained from such reading. The topic of sentence 1 (time spent on newspaper reading) is not alluded to again in the paragraph until sentence 6. The significant meaning implied in the relations between sentences 1, 2 and 6 seems to be that most undergraduates do read the paper and spend less than an hour per day doing so. However, the reader who makes this inference is thrown into doubt by sentences 3, 4 and 5 which appear to shift the discussion to a defence of the minority who do not read the paper. In simplified text generation different strands of thought are set down, probably as they come to mind, and no attempt is made to evaluate the logical connection between them or to make the connection explicit to the reader. The complex process of thinking out relations between ideas before selecting meaning for the next unit of text is reduced to a simpler routine: think up ideas and select anything that has some connection to any topic in the previous sentence.

The convention of making explicit part-whole relations at the macro level in academic discourse facilitates the reader's understanding of the organizational structure of the text. Without overt relational information the reader is compelled to rely on his/her inferencing capabilities to work out the relevance of items of information to the global purpose of the text. In simplified student texts the motivation for items of information often remains obscure despite the reader's most cooperative efforts at inferencing because the unstated link is known only to the writer. Figure 4 is an example of a student text that fails to state the relevance of an episode to the main argument of which the episode is a part. The purpose of the episode is to interpret the finding regarding one reported method of coping with stress in the context of the larger argument (i.e. the Discussion section of the report) which carries the theme: religion is a significant factor in helping undergraduates to cope with stress.

Figure 4. Absence of Relation between Part and Whole

The second largest group were those who responded: "Carry on with life" (20%). Unlike the group who resort to religious practices (praying, visits to place of worship, etc.), this group seems to have an attitude of self reliance. Such an attitude probably has connection to the group's religious belief in rebirth and re-death. This concept teaches that "... the conditions of each new form of existence are determined by the merit and demerit of the actions that have taken place in previous forms of existence" (Encyclopedia of Religion). ... Therefore, this group of people believe they have to endure suffering all by themselves. They do not

have the concept of reaching out to God for help like the first group. [The discussion ends here]

(Student SN)

Student SN ends her discussion of the findings without stating anywhere in the text the connection between the point of the episode in Figure 4 and the theme of the whole discussion section, which is: religion is a significant factor in coping with stress regardless of whether subjects report religious practices like praying. At a writing conference after her report was written SN was able to explain the missing connection: the "second largest" group's response, like the first group's, is also based on religious belief, thus underlining again the significance of religion in undergraduates' coping with stress. Many students, like SN, are able to explain macro-level relationships and the motivation for items of information in their text when questioned. Their failing to do so when writing cannot then be the result of an inability to think.

At writing conferences, prompted by the teacher's questions (e.g. Why do you say X?), student writers invariably succeed in supplying missing links and stating the relevance of the ideas in their essays. However, during composing the same students are unable to identify the absence of relational information because the teacher's prompts are not available. Without the teacher's prompts students are unable to perform the difficult task of organizing their ideas and anticipating audience need. Their strategy is to simplify the complex process of organization and present information as they would in an unstructured oral communication situation. So items of information are given as they come to mind or in the order in which they were learnt, instead of organized in logical linear steps to suit the purpose of the text. In oral communication, however, one's audience are able to ask questions and say what part of the message is unclear. This is not possible in writing. The writer therefore has to organize disparate pieces of information into a hierarchical framework and be aware of when part-whole relations and motivation for information have to be explicitly stated.

3. *Omitted Closure*

The third characteristic feature found in students' simplified discourse is the absence of the closure at the end of an argument, which physically may be a paragraph, an episode comprising several paragraphs, or an entire section of more than one episode in an essay or report. Omitted closure gives the impression that the argument has been abandoned and left hanging in mid-air, as it were, instead of

being brought to an appropriate close. In academic writing one form of closure is a reference to the global theme of the whole text or to the high-level theme within the episode or paragraph, as in Figure 5 where the close reminds the reader of the topic idea: the causal relationship between intelligence and crime.

Figure 5. Paragraph With Closure

The period immediately before and after World War I saw a flurry of interest in the relationship between intelligence and crime. . . . it was argued that the dull-witted simply could comprehend neither the punishments attached to illegal behavior nor the rewards linked to conformity. With the development of scales to measure intelligence . . . , it was possible to put the idea to some sort of test. An I.Q. of 75 had been set as the dividing line between normal intelligence and feeble-mindedness . . . , and a number of studies indicated that by this standard a substantial proportion of imprisoned criminals were mentally deficient. However, extensive intelligence testing by the Army Psychological Corps revealed that by this standard almost one third of the recruits for the draft were feeble-minded, a finding that made many people understandably suspicious of the definitions and procedures of the intelligence testers. In addition, more careful comparisons between prisoners and nonprisoners showed little difference between the two populations. Theories about the causal role of mental deficiency diminished in popularity.

From Criminology by Gresham M Sykes

Without an appropriate closure the reader has no statement of the motivation behind the argument just presented and must rely on his or her memory of earlier text, if the motivation is stated there. Otherwise, the reader has to resort to surmise, as is the case in Figure 6.

Figure 6. Omitted Closure

Firstly, I feel that the implementation of the opting-out law is not to sweep the problem of apathy under the carpet. Instead, it is a solution to it. People are being apathetic not in the sense that they are not for the organ donation scheme, but that they just couldn't be bothered to go through the paper work to 'legalise' [sic] their donation. P(60s).

(Student 12. Final draft)

Note: P denotes pause in seconds.

The excerpt in Figure 6 is from a letter written by a student to a newspaper to express support for a law (in the making at the time) known as the opting-out law under which all non-Muslim Singaporeans are potential organ donors unless they indicate in writing their wish to opt out. According to the student, who was interviewed immediately after he had finished writing (details of this study are reported in Chandrasegaran, 1991), the deleted words at the end of the paragraph began an abandoned sentence that was "the new law would make things simpler for potential donors". Had the sentence been written, it would have made a suitable closure to the paragraph for it would have highlighted the overall theme of the letter: that the opting-out law will facilitate organ donation.

The student's self-reported reason for aborting his intended closing sentence after a 60-second pause was his concern that the letter "would be too long". The basis of his decision is telling. It reflects the inexperienced student writer's inadequate concept of the discourse structure of academic expository/argumentative writing. The concept is a simplified script in which the closure is dispensable or of so little significance that it can be sacrificed for the sake of a parameter of secondary importance like the physical length of the text.

The three manifestations of discourse structure simplification described in this section - inadequate support, non-explicit relational information and omitted closure - have pedagogical implications which are briefly set out below.

Implications for Teaching

This paper has argued that a simplified script of written academic discourse is at the root of ineffective student writing. It follows then that writing teachers should aim at helping students to internalize a more sophisticated script containing all the moves expected in good academic writing. The instructional methodology for realizing this aim has to include more than the study of model texts, because product study alone will not lead to the acquisition of the cognitive behaviours necessary for effective discourse generation. Knowing that support is a feature of academic argument does not equip the student with the capability of deciding when support is in order or how to generate and select appropriate supporting details. There must be learning activities that enable students to experience the internal states and the cognitive processes underlying effective decision-making in composing.

Teachers can help students to overcome the limitations of their internal simplified script by encouraging them to take a global, communication-oriented approach to writing, in place of the word-/sentence approach observed of inexperienced writers (e.g. in the studies of Sommers (1980), Chandrasegaran (1991). A global communication-oriented approach will build up an awareness of not just the top-level rhetorical structure of academic discourse but also the communicative function of its conventional features (topic idea focus, support, etc.).

In promoting the whole-text communicative approach to writing assignments teachers need to help their students learn rhetorical strategies of decision-making, i.e. using purpose, audience and other aspects of the rhetorical problem as reference points when deciding what to say and how to say it. Student writers will be forever tethered to a simplified script if their decision-making is largely governed by the last element (with each word, sentence or paragraph decided solely by the last written word, sentence or paragraph), the method of composing most widely practised among ESL university students (Chandrasegaran, 1991). Teaching rhetorical strategies takes time and dedicated effort. Procedures have to be devised to enable students to experience a felt sense of writer purpose, to see the reader's need for supporting arguments or clarification, and to practise complex mental routines like recognizing ambiguity, generating appropriate elaboration, and identifying the points at which relational information should be explicitly stated. With ESL students whose mastery of the language is still imperfect there is the additional challenge of developing a sensitivity to the communicative value of grammatical form and lexis. The difficulty here lies in teaching students to be concerned about the textual and functional implications of form, to ask questions about whether the linguistic devices they have used convey an intended meaning appropriate to the rhetorical situation instead of pursuing surface structure accuracy for its own sake.

Conclusion

The pedagogical implications presented above underline the value of understanding unsuccessful student writing as a simplification of discourse structure which has its roots in the students' incomplete mental script for conventional academic texts of the argumentative/expository type. Unlike the other explanations of unsatisfactory writing discussed at the beginning of this paper/ (inability to think, poor grammar, etc), the simplification theory has the potential for bringing about a whole-text, rhetorical approach to writing instruction aimed at helping students to master the cognitive operations leading to the generation of communicatively adequate written discourse. Teachers who believe that inapt writing arises from

simplifying complex discourse structure will find it natural to accept the challenge of teaching students the mental procedures for making composing decisions appropriate to writer purpose and reader expectations, e.g. procedures for deciding how to select details so as to maintain the focal point, when and how to state relations between topics to achieve global coherence, etc.. When students learn to execute rhetorical strategies of decision-making their simplified mental representation of academic discourse will give way to a mature sophisticated script, then their writing will become convincingly substantiated, more coherent, and better focused.

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